

## Ep #46: Why We Numb and How to Stop



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Krista St-Germain**

[The Widowed Mom Podcast](#)

## Ep #46: Why We Numb and How to Stop

Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, episode 46, Why We Numb and How to Stop.

Most widows sometimes feel the urge to numb out. We want to get away from our thoughts and feelings because sometimes they just seem like too much. And so, we turn to things; alcohol, food, shopping, work, new relationships, casual sex, projects around the house, sleep, gambling, social media, Netflix binges, all sorts of things to try and escape these feelings of grief.

And if you've struggled here, there's nothing to be ashamed of, and I promise, there's nothing wrong with you. And in this two-part episode, I'm going to explain exactly why we do this and how you can stop.

Welcome to *The Widowed Mom Podcast*, the only podcast that offers a proven process to help you work through your grief to grow, evolve, and create a future you can actually look forward to. Here's your host, certified life coach, grief expert, widow, and mom, Krista St-Germain.

Hey, everybody. Welcome to the podcast. Before we jump in, I want to do a little listener shoutout. We're almost at 200 ratings. I would love it, if you haven't rated the podcast, if it's helping you, go rate it. that would just be so helpful.

So, this one is from a listener who calls themselves ArtsMrs. And the name of the review, which is a five-star review, thank you so much, is Oh My Heart.

And ArtsMrs wrote, "I'm not sure why this podcast ended up on my Facebook page. I lost my husband seven months ago. My husband fought two different types of cancer; primary brain cancer and left tonsil squamous cell carcinoma. The love of my life, my lover, my best friend, and so much more declined pretty quickly. I needed the help of hospice care so I could

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just be his wife again. I'm extremely grateful for The Widowed Mom's Bill of Rights. This podcast really spoke to me and gave me permission to feel everything I need to. I was really questioning if my actions and feelings were normal. I was judging myself. Thank you so much for helping me. My heart is grateful."

You are so welcome. Ladies, I've got to tell you, when I get reviews like this, this is what fuels me because you just have no idea how much it means to hear that what I'm putting out there in the world is actually making a difference in your life. So, please keep those reviews coming. It helps me figure out too what you like about the podcast, how I can be of better service, but also just lights my fire and keeps me going to know that the work that I'm doing makes a difference to you. So, thank you for that.

Okay, before we get into this episode, I also want to tell you that I am not a medical doctor. Not that you think I am, but I just want to remind you, I'm not a medical doctor. This is not medical advice. So, if you identify as an alcoholic or as a drug addict and you're struggling with addiction or compulsive behaviors then I really want to advise you to seek help from a licensed medical professional. That's my little disclaimer.

But in this episode, I want to talk about numbing; why we do it, first of all. And I've decided to do this in two parts because I think it's more complicated than one episode can allow. And also, I like to keep these episodes a little bit shorter so that you have time to listen. I know a lot of you are busy and I just can't get it all done in one short episode.

So, today, I want to specifically focus on what numbing is, why it might be a problem, because sometimes it's not a problem, and then help you understand why we do it. Then, next week, we're going to take a more deep dive into what to do about it. But I at least want you to understand what it is, think about what's happening in your life, whether there are things that you want to change that are related to numbing, and then help

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you clearly understand why you do it. I also want to check and see if there's any shame happening around it. So, we're going to talk about that too.

So, first of all, let's talk about what it is. So, numbing, and you'll also hear me use the term buffering, are kind of interchangeable. Numbing is something that we do to not feel feelings. It's something that we do when we don't want to have the thoughts and feelings that we're having and we're kind of looking for an escape button. And so, we reach outside of ourselves to try and get away from what we're feeling and what we're thinking.

And so, in the context of this podcast, I'm mostly going to be talking about numbing as something that we do to get away from negative feelings. But I think it's worth noting, even though it might seem counterintuitive, that humans actually sometimes try to numb our positive emotions too.

It seems like we have this band of emotions that are in the middle of the intensity scale. They're not too positive, not too negative. And I use positive and negative in air-quotes because I really don't think that emotions are positive or negative. But that's how we have come to think about them.

But we seem to have this band of emotions that aren't too intense, that are just kind of somewhere in the medium scale, more along the lines of neutral. They're not too intense in both a positive or a negative direction. And we're comfortable in that space.

But too much negative emotion, and sometimes too much positive emotion, we get the feeling that we can't handle it, it's too much. And we start to want to escape from that.

So, in the context of this podcast, I am thinking primarily of negative emotion. I just want you to be aware of sometimes you might find yourself doing numbing behaviors even when the emotion that you're trying to get

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away from is actually something we would consider as positive, to keep that in mind.

So, when my husband died, I did a lot of numbing with food. The pantry had all the comfort for me. And shopping. I did a lot of shopping. I would just go to the pantry, no matter what the emotion was. And, of course, in the beginning, people were bringing me food, so I had a lot of food that I didn't normally eat around the house. But even after the food wore off and people stopped bringing it or I had used through what they brought, I was still turning to food for comfort.

I was still trying to solve an emotion by burying it with a food. I don't think this was a new pattern for me. I think I've done this a lot in my life, especially with boredom. I have tried to solve boredom with food for a long, long time. But after Hugo died, I was really trying to numb out on the sadness, numb out on the loneliness, numb out on kind of hopelessness, and really any of the other feelings with grief.

And remember, all the feelings are usually part of the grief experience. They're all different for all of us depending on what we're thinking. So, it's different for the individual. But that's what it was for me. It was trying to get away from sadness and loneliness and hopelessness.

And also, then I shopped. And gosh, Amazon sure makes that easy. And I would buy things – not necessarily un-useful things, but definitely things that were not needed. But that gave me a little dopamine hit. I felt a little better when I bought them. So, I remember buying this little posture button thing that you put on your shirt and it would help you sit up better.

And I thought, you know, that's a good thing, I should have that. And I bought an expensive Sonicare toothbrush. Apparently, I decided that that would be a good thing to fix my feelings.

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Now, they're not bad purchases. There's nothing wrong with them. But the reason I was buying those things wasn't necessarily because I needed them. I also decided I would buy Rosetta Stone – I think I bought an annual pass – I don't remember – to learning French. You know, my husband was a French-speaker and I was having some regrets that I hadn't learned to speak French, and so I bought that.

I don't even know what I bought. Honestly, most of what I bought came out of a fog. I really don't remember it. I could probably go back and pull it all out. But I do remember that quite often I was turning to shopping for some emotional relief.

But we see this in lots of different behaviors. It's not just food. It's not just shopping. It really can be anything. So, a lot of women come to me and they are drinking more than they have ever been drinking before. They go to get the kids in bed and then they turn to alcohol or wine for comfort.

That's usually when they find themselves the most lonely is after the kids are in bed and they've gotten, you know, willpowered their way through the day and handled the to-do list. But then the kids go to bed and they're left with all of these thoughts and feelings and, of course, that's not what they want. And they don't have any other tools. So, they just check out and turn to alcohol.

And sometimes, that means a little bit of alcohol. Sometimes, that can mean a lot of alcohol. Sometimes, I see people come to me and they're numbing with sleeping.

I think part of this comes from this idea that somehow time heals. I wish that were true. If it were true, then we could just all wait a particular amount of time and we'd be healed. But that's not the way that it works.

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But it makes sense that if we are under that assumption, that time will heal and all we need to do is just get through the time and allow enough time to pass, then we would attempt to figure out ways to make our time more tolerable. And so, for some of us, that means we go to sleep. We try to sleep it away because, when we sleep, we don't have to deal with the thoughts and feelings.

And then we wake up and we're closer to somehow the healing of time, which unfortunately doesn't really come. And then, maybe we don't get to spend our time the way that we otherwise would have wanted to spend it had we had the tools to navigate those thoughts and feelings.

Sometimes clients come to me and they have turned to relationships. They jump into a relationship that maybe they're not really ready for. They don't really like their reasons for being in the relationship, but they see it as a path to not feeling so sad, to not feeling lonely, to not feeling any of the feelings of grief that they're trying to get away from and they jump into a relationship.

But, you know, were not too surprised because we've all been in relationships before. Relationships are work and they aren't what provides us our happiness and they certainly aren't what takes away any negative emotions either. So, sometimes we then now have a whole other set of thoughts and feelings to deal with on top of the ones that we were trying to bury with the relationships.

Sometimes I work with clients who have turned to gambling to get away from their thoughts and feelings. Or there are those that throw themselves into work, that throw themselves into their career. I know I did a little bit of this too; really focused on distracting myself with projects at work. And that's not always necessarily something that results in a consequence you don't want in life. But maybe it does.

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Maybe all of that extra time that you're working is keeping you away from your kids, or maybe that extra time that you're spending working is keeping you away from figuring out what are the new sources of joy that you're going to create in your life, what are the new pastimes and hobbies that you haven't yet figured out how to do because you've buried yourself so much in work, again, often because we're told, "Oh dear, just stay busy. Just stay busy, dear and you'll feel better." But it really doesn't work.

Sometimes, we distract ourselves or numb ourselves with things that have a consequence that, overall in life, creates less of what we want ultimately. Maybe it takes our time. It has us using our time in ways that don't really support the goals that we have for ourselves. But we're not really thinking about that because we're just thinking about how much pain we're in and desperately trying to figure out a way to get away from it.

Sometimes, we'll use things to numb that maybe are more socially acceptable. And maybe they aren't having a negative consequence in life. Maybe you're organizing your house. There's not necessarily a negative consequence to having an organized house, unless of course, you spend a ton of time doing it and that time that you've invested is now time lost toward other things that you would actually like to spend your time in.

Sometimes, we numb out with exercise. And to a point, that can be useful, if it's a healthy amount of exercise. Sometimes, we numb out with really paying attention to our food. And to a point, that can also be helpful.

So, when I'm talking about numbing, what I'm not saying is that numbing is good, bad, right, or wrong. This is not an issue of morality. It's not an issue of should or shouldn't. It's just a pattern that I want you to notice, to see if it's happening in your life. Because chances are, if it's happening, it's happening unconsciously.

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And if it's happening unconsciously, you may or may not think you have the ability to control it. And you may or may not like the results that it's creating. So, we just want to go through and look at these patterns and see, do I like the way that I'm living my life? Do I like the behaviors, if I'm using any sort of behavior to numb out on an emotion unconsciously, is that what I want?

And if not, then you will have the ability to change it. And I'm going to teach you how. And the unfortunate part about numbing, if we do it unconsciously, is that yes, it can unplug you from emotions and thoughts that you're experiencing. But it can also unplug you from your life.

It can also keep what's really happening, your true human experience, muted down to the point that you aren't really living it. And if we're always living in this kind of muted numbed out state, we ever really get to experience what we're actually going through. And when we don't get to experience what we're actually going through, we don't know what it is, and so we can't change it.

We can't even decide if we like it because we aren't actually living it. We're just continuing to dampen it down, to mute it with our behaviors. And most of these behaviors, at best, are a short-term fix. And many of them have far more negative consequences in our lives than we want.

Again, it's not good or bad to numb. It's not an issue of right or wrong. It's not moral. It's not morally correct. It's not morally incorrect. It just is. As humans on the planet, we get to decide who we want to be and how we want to live.

So, please don't hear right or wrong. Please hear, I want you to be aware of what you're doing and why so that you can consciously choose what you're doing and why, so that you can live more deliberately.

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And what's interesting about a lot of the ways that we use to numb is that some of them create rather challenging cycles for us to break out of. So, the things, especially that our brains react to chemically can have us needing more and more of the same thing to get the same numbing effect that we want, right?

So, the more we drink, the more we need to drink often. The more we gamble, the more we need to gamble. When dopamine is involved, or other neurochemicals, there is something happening in our brain, when our brain is consistently flooded with, that our brain changes to adapt to that and we can actually end up needing more of that substance or more of that behavior to get the same fix that we used to not need so much of.

And so, what starts as a small urge based on the way that our brain works can turn into a very large loud urge that is increasingly difficult to ignore. And I want to teach you how to do that. I want to teach you, if you don't like the cycle of desire that might be present in your life around a particular behavior, if the idea of giving up something is a little bit anxiety-producing, then it might be something we want to look at.

And as you think about that, you might be thinking, "Well yeah, I'd like to give that up." But in that moment where you feel the need for it, when you have the desire for it, if someone were to take it away as a potential solution to the emotion that you're feeling, would that make you anxious, would you feel uncomfortable?

And if the answer to that is yes, then it might be something worth looking into. It might be something that you're using to numb out, and it might be something that's creating a cycle in your life that you don't really want.

So, the reason we numb out, we want to, is because sometimes we just reach that point where we don't want to feel that feeling anymore. We don't want to have those thoughts anymore and we just want an escape button.

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But also, that happens because of the way our brain is designed. And if you haven't listened to it, go back and listen to the episode of the podcast that I did called *Widowhood and the Motivational Triad*. It's episode 23. If you haven't listened to that, take a listen because it explains this in a little more detail.

But basically, our primitive brain was designed to seek pleasure, to avoid pain, and to be efficient. And it was done that way in the interest of our survival. So, when we're seeking pleasure, that means not always the things that are in our best interest. There's a lot of pleasure, especially chemically, that we can get from some of these behaviors that we use to numb.

And our brain is wired to like pleasure. And because it's also designed to avoid pain, then of course we're going to want to get away from negative emotions. It's how our most primitive brain is programmed; seek pleasure, avoid pain, and be efficient. Keep doing the same things over and over and over so that we don't have to burn a lot of calories.

So, we have to understand that that core makeup is really contributing to this problem and something that we need to be aware of if we want to change it. Because it is against the fabric of our primitive brain's design to want to do anything other than seek pleasure, avoid pain, and be efficient.

So, go back to that episode, *Widowhood and the Motivational Triad* if you want a little bit more information there. We have to know that, before we ever decide to change, that our brain doesn't like change, our brain would just rather keep pushing the button and getting the pellets and sitting on the couch and doing the easy thing and avoiding all of the hard things. It's human nature.

The other thing we need to be aware of is how we judge ourselves for some of these behaviors and what we make some of these behaviors

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mean about who we are and what's possible for us and the type of person that we're capable of being. Because if we see any of our past or current behaviors as something to be embarrassed of, something we should hide, something that is shameful or wrong, we're going to struggle to change it.

Shame is never useful when we're trying to change. And we think that it is. Somehow, somewhere, we started using shame as a way to motivate people. We shame ourselves or try to shame ourselves into being different and being better. It never really works.

Shame actually keeps us from changing. Shame blocks us. And so shame, of course, like any other feeling is just a product of our thinking. It comes from our thoughts. Shame comes from thoughts like, "There's something wrong with me. I'm not good enough. I'm not a good person." And so if you're feeling shame, we have to do that work before we're going to be able to change any of these numbing behaviors.

Because what happens is that when we're feeling shame and we don't want to feel shame, we think that the answer to not feeling shame is in changing the behavior, changing who we are. If we can do differently, if we can be differently, then surely, we don't have to feel shame. This is a lie.

Doing differently and being differently is not what causes shame. What causes shame is what we think about ourselves, what we think about our behavior. And so if we try to change a behavior because we think that the answer to our shame is in changing the behavior, we're going to be using willpower.

We're not going to be doing it in a way that is sustainable, in a way that works. We're going to be gripping our way through, trying to prove to our brain something that we don't believe, which is that we're okay, that we're good enough, that there's nothing fundamentally wrong with us, and it just doesn't work.

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If it worked, I would say let's do it. But it just doesn't work. Our brain will continue to find evidence of our not-enoughness. Our brain will continue to find evidence that we are flawed. The only way to get something other than shame is to retrain our brain so that it stops thinking and believing the thoughts that create shame.

So if you have shame about any sort of numbing that you're currently doing, we have to deal with that first. There can be no other way. We cannot just change the behavior and then you won't feel the shame. You won't change the behavior and even if you did change the behavior, chances are you'd still feel the shame. You'd just transfer one numbing mechanism to another and continue to validate your own thought that there's something wrong with you.

So between this episode and next, before I tell you the how, of how we go about changing the numbing behaviors, what I want you to think about is what is it that you're doing to numb? I want you to make a decision about - and there might be a list of things that you're doing to numb. Go through that list. Write them down. What am I doing?

Sleeping? Am I drinking alcohol? Am I spending money that I didn't plan on spending? What am I doing? Am I overworking? Make a list. Write down all of those things that you're doing. And then I want you to assess the impact of those things on your life.

Some of them will impact you differently than others. Remember, you are the boss of your life. You get to decide what behaviors you keep and what behaviors you change. Not because you should or shouldn't, not because it's right or wrong, but because you are the boss of your life.

So I want you to list out those behaviors and I want you to think about what the impact on your life is of you keeping those behaviors, and then I want

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you to decide whether or not you want to keep them. Maybe some of them you just want to decrease a little bit, but you don't mind keeping them.

Like, I don't think watching Netflix and numbing out with TV is a bad thing to a certain point for me. If I do that for a scheduled amount of time and I'm happy with how I'm using the rest of my time and I really get pleasure from just chilling out and watching a particular movie or series and it doesn't consume more time than I want it to consume, then that's just me making decisions about how I want to spend my time.

But if I get stuck in a Netflix binge and there are a million other things I'd rather be doing but I just can't - don't want to cope or can't cope with my thoughts and feelings, and so I'm using Netflix as an escape button to my life, then as I sit back and I look at my life, I don't like that impact. Do I want to give up Netflix completely? No. But maybe I'd like to limit it to a certain amount of time on a certain couple of days a week instead of the current amount of time, which could be a lot, over a lot of days of week.

So what is it that you're using to numb out? And do you want to keep doing it or not? I want you to make that decisions. I just want you to think about it. And then I also want you to notice, how am I feeling about what I'm doing? What am I making what I'm doing mean? Am I making it mean that there's something wrong with me? Am I making it mean that I'm a bad person? Am I making it mean that I'm flawed? Am I judging the crap out of myself and using this as a weapon against myself?

Because if that's the case, we're going to want to clean that up. The honest truth about why we do anything is simply because we're humans and as humans, we're driven by emotions. And when we aren't choosing our thoughts consciously, we're just believing whatever thoughts pop up in our head, then whatever feelings we experience because of those thoughts will be the reason that we do something.

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So case in point, you're looking back at your day and you're thinking, "Ugh, I had a hard day. I deserve some chocolate." You think that thought in your mind. It feels very real. Doesn't feel optional. Just feels like an observation that you're making. I deserve chocolate.

And then that sentence creates a wanting, creates a feeling of desire for you. And as humans, we do things based on how we feel or how we want to feel. So when we feel desire and we don't know how to allow that desire to be there without being answered, we eat the chocolate. The answer becomes in the pantry.

So there's nothing wrong with you if this is happening. You are whole and complete and amazing and worthy and wonderful. What's happening is that you're having some thoughts that are causing some feelings that are driving some actions.

And so we're going to get into this in more specifics. I want to give you this tool so that you understand that your behavior is not a great mystery. Your behavior is not an indication that you are forever damaged or flawed. Your behavior is simply a pattern of thoughts creating feelings, driving actions.

There's nothing shameful about that. Nothing shameful in the least. It's something that all humans have in common. We're all walking around the world and we're doing things because we're driven by emotions and we're feeling emotions because of sentences in our mind. That's just the way it is. Nothing to be ashamed of. Nothing broken, nothing wrong, nothing that even needs to be fixed because nothing's broken.

Just a pattern, or maybe multiple patterns that need to be understood because when you can see these patterns and you can see them for what they are and you can see, "Oh yes, I had a thought, made me feel a feeling, and then I did the thing. I thought, I deserve this, creates an urge,

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drives me to eat the chocolate or drink the wine or spend the money.” Whatever it is. It’s just thoughts causing feelings, driving actions.

That’s the way the humans work. This is the basis for the thought model that you’ll hear me talk about a million and one times. And if you’ve coached with me, you know exactly how to use it because that’s what I teach.

And it’s also because nobody told you how to deal with feelings. Nobody taught you how to allow an urge. Nobody taught you what to do when you have a feeling, and so of course you’re going to try to want to get away from it. And your brain is designed to avoid it.

So, between now and the next episode, look at all those behaviors. Write them down. Decide, do I like the impact on this in my life? Do I want to keep doing this, or would I rather not? Maybe I just want to keep doing it but do it less. And am I feeling any shame or judgment about what I’ve been doing? And if so, why?

Because we got to change that first. Then in the next episode, we’re going to talk about what are the feelings that you’re trying to get away from and how do you actually change this behavior so that you like the results that it’s creating in your life? That’s what I have got for you today. I will see you next week in part two.

In the meantime, if you want to get on the phone and you want to see if coaching with me is right for you, you know this by now. Go to [coachingwithkrista.com](http://coachingwithkrista.com). Click that request a consult button and we’ll see if coaching is a good fit for you and talk it through.

Alright, hope you have an amazing week. I love you. You’ve got this, and I’ll see you next time. Take care. Bye-bye.

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Ready to start building a future you can actually look forward to? Get a free copy of Krista's Love Your Life Again Game Plan, and learn her three-step process so you can stop feeling stuck and start creating your next great chapter. No matter what you've been through, your past does not have to define what's possible in your future.

Text the word PLAN to 1-858-widows-1, or visit [coachingwithkrista.com/plan](http://coachingwithkrista.com/plan) and get Krista's Love Your Life Again Game Plan delivered straight to your inbox. A future you love is still possible and you are worth it. Text the word PLAN to 1-858-widows-1, or visit [coachingwithkrista.com/plan](http://coachingwithkrista.com/plan) and get your free game plan today.